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ARMS-TEST CURBS SET OFF A DISPUTE

C.I.A. and Energy Dept. Fault Administration's Plan for Monitoring A-Blasts

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 25 — A sharp debate has developed among Government experts over a tentative plan by the Reagan Administration to improve the monitoring of Soviet compliance with two 1970's nuclear test-limitation treaties, according to classified Government documents and Administration officials.

The treaties limit the size of underground nuclear explosions.

Experts from the Central Intelligence Agency have complained that the plan is "deficient." Energy Department officials have also criticized the plan because they believe it would allow Soviet experts to gather sensitive intelligence information.

But other Government officials dismiss the criticisms as exaggerations.

The debate has emerged just weeks before Administration officials are scheduled to testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about their ideas for enhancing America's ability to monitor Soviet adherence to the treaties.

At issue are the 1974 Threshold Test Ban Treaty, which limits underground tests to yields of no more than 150 kilotons, and a companion 1976 agreement that extends this limit to peaceful underground explosions for such purposes as construction.

What Reagan Said Before Iceland

On the eve of the Iceland summit meeting in October, President Reagan said he would ask the Senate to approve the two treaties next year. He also said, however, that the treaties would not take effect until the Soviet Union agreed to new verification measures.

In return, the House of Representatives dropped its effort to legislate a ban on all but the smaller nuclear tests.

But now that the treaties are to be taken up by the Congress, strong differences have emerged among Government experts.

At the heart of the debate is a monitoring approach proposed by Mr. Reagan called Corrtex. Under this approach, a cable would be inserted into the ground to take direct measurements of a nuclear blast.

Reagan Invites Russians Here

Mr. Reagan has invited Soviet experts to visit the American test site and examine the Corrtex system.

American experts have already proposed measures based on this approach in private talks with Soviet experts in Geneva. Specifically, the Americans have suggested the adoption of two measures to improve monitoring of the treaties.

One would require each side to notify the other in advance of all tests of 75 kilotons or greater. The United States would be allowed to take direct measurements of all tests above this 75 kiloton threshold using the Corrtex system. The Soviet Union could use this system or another system, as long as it did not present more opportunities for gathering intelligence information than the Corrtex system. A kiloton is the explosive force of 1,000 tons of TNT.

The second measure would state that if one side did not conduct tests of 75 kilotons or greater over six months, the other could monitor the largest test it conducted in a specified area within its test range in this period.

But the C.I.A. has criticized this approach as technically flawed.

The Administration's current monitoring plan "is deficient in that it is not a comprehensive, technically defensible approach to maximizing the acquisition of data relevant to verification," says one C.I.A. paper, dated Dec. 4, which circulated outside the agency.

Other Measures Are Sought

To improve monitoring, the C.I.A. has argued that Corrtex be supplemented by other measures that would also improve seismic monitoring abilities.

The C.I.A. paper suggests that the failure to make such improvements in seismic and other monitoring abilities would lead to some uncertainties in applying the Corrtex monitoring system.

For example, the C.I.A. paper asserts that the United States may not be able to tell for sure whether the Soviet Union is in fact verifying the United States of all tests that are 75 kilotons or greater. The Corrtex would be used to monitor these tests.

Energy Department officials are said to be concerned that the Administration's plan would allow the Russians to gather sensitive information about some American tests, including tests for Mr. Reagan's "Star Wars" research plan. The Energy Department oversees the American nuclear testing program.

More Than C.I.A. Needs to Know?

But other Government experts involved in the issue strongly dispute these criticisms. They said the C.I.A. was seeking more information about Soviet testing than the United States needed to build confidence that the treaties were being observed.

"There is a delicate balance to be struck on the question of verification," said one Government critic of the C.I.A. view. "And what you are seeing are weights being piled up one side."

This official added that the new monitoring measures suggested by C.I.A. officials represented "a lot more than we hope to get from the Russians or really need."

This official said the information gained through the Corrtex system would allow the United States to better "calibrate" its seismic measurements. The end result, he maintained, was that the uncertainty in seismic measurements would be reduced, eliminating the need for the comprehensive set of monitoring measures suggested by the C.I.A.

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